



MIKE MOONEY/*The Evening Bulletin*

Page Talbott, the curator of the National Constitution Center's "Benjamin Franklin: In Search of a Better World" exhibit, stands in front of an interactive map which shows the reach of Benjamin Franklin's postal routes and publishing franchises. Talbott spent three years tracking down objects for the exhibit, which will travel to St. Louis, Houston, Denver and Atlanta before crossing the Atlantic to Paris, where Franklin was the American ambassador.

Behind The Scenes With Franklin

An Inside Look At The Constitution Center's Tribute To Ben Franklin

By JIM McCAFFREY
THE EVENING BULLETIN

PHILADELPHIA — It cost \$6 million to mount the Tercentennial Benjamin Franklin exhibit at the National Constitution Center.

Titled "Benjamin Franklin: In Search of a Better World," the exhibit contains more than 300 artifacts, 49 interactive displays, and state-of-the-art special effects.

It is the largest collection of Franklin artifacts ever assembled and includes all five of the original founding documents — the Albany Plan, the Declaration of Independence, the Treaty of Amity, the Treaty of Paris, and the U.S. Constitution — Franklin signed. (He is the only of the country's founders to sign all five.)

The collection was amassed from 76 institutions, from 16 states, from four foreign countries, and from six descendants.

And yet, exhibit curator Page Talbott is the first to admit, this extraordinary show is at best only an introduction to the impact this printer, scientist, inventor, diplomat, writer, philanthropist, businessman, and public servant had on his times, his country, and on succeeding generations.

"There were a treasure trove of things we could use," Talbott acknowledged. "We had a list better than 90 pages long. I just had to cut and cut. He was so multi-dimensional. We included as much as we possibly could."

Talbott and Anna Krain, a conservation technician from



MIKE MOONEY/*The Evening Bulletin*

"Ben Franklin was the first to come up with the idea of a matching grant. It was for the Penn Hospital."

Page Talbott
Curator

Philadelphia's Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts, spent two hours yesterday walking reporters through the exhibit explaining their work and what they learned of their subject as they

ALSO AT THE CONSTITUTION CENTER: United States Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer looks into the audience at the National Constitution Center. Breyer was there to talk about his book *Active Liberty: Interpreting Our Democratic Constitution*, which is based on his 2004 Harvard University lectures about human values.

went.

Talbot, who managed to create the display in just three years (most exhibits of this historic importance and comprehensive scope would take at least five years to curate), mentioned the initial research for the show was funded by a matching grant program.

"Ben Franklin was the first to come up with the idea of a matching grant. It was for the Penn Hospital," she mentioned casually.

Krain and her firm worked the restoration and mounting of the printed exhibits.

Continued On Page 3

Franklin: Behind The Scenes

Continued From Page 1

CCAHA also supervised sub-contractors who worked on furniture, painting, objects and textile restoration in preparation for the exhibit.

Krain is modest discussing her work handling important historic documents.

Her favorite project was working on the William Penn treaties with local Indian tribes.

"It was very cool to see how the Indians made their marks," she said.

Krain laughs and adds, poking fun at herself, "After 17 years I just forget about how important these items really are. Sometimes I walk out of my house to go to work and I say to myself, 'I'm off to save America's treasures.'"

Many of the works in the Franklin exhibit, Talbott assures, have "rarely seen the light of day."

"I still have a wish-list," she added wistfully, "We are still working with many organizations to launch a missing objects project."

At the top of her wish list is a chess table Franklin used in France. She traced the history of the piece until it was sold at auction in the 1970s and disappeared.

Talbott points to the Franklin family Bible, printed in England in 1763 and purchased by Franklin for his daughter Sally Franklin Bache.

The Bible is open to where the public can read the original inscriptions.

But Talbott illustrates, so to speak, the work on the binding CCAHA did. She urged the reporters to bend and look through the Plexiglas underneath the book to see the work on the binding.

They explained that Rolf Kat, a CCAHA technician, used a highly developed laser printing process to restore and replace the original gilding on the Bible.

"Sometimes on these projects we have to find a whole new way of

working," Krain says with a modest shrug.

Talbott adds some artifacts took up to 18 months to restore.

They lead the visitors to one of the finest examples of Franklin's printing still in existence: an original 1733 copy of *Poor Richard's Almanac*. Other paper displays were not so well treated. Some had been mounted for much of their life with pine wood backs. The technique allowed acids to seep into the paper. Later preservation techniques allowed the acids to set. There's nothing to be done now that will improve them.

In many of the displays there stands a cartoon-like squirrel. It dresses according to the theme of the particular exhibit. The squirrel has a name — Skuggs.

Skuggs also has a Franklin related story. "Skuggs" was the name given an American grey squirrel Franklin gave to a friend in England. He, for better or worse, is responsible for introducing that species to the island nation. He later received a report that the squirrel was "as free and happy as any American colonial."

As she demonstrated the interactive exhibit recreating the printing technique Franklin used, Talbott explained the rationale for the high-tech work, saying, "We created this exhibit with the thought we would be reaching people of all different learning styles and all different ages."

Skuggs, she said, was one way of keeping children involved in learning.

There are exhibits illustrating Franklin's business career. He franchised his printing business, taking 30 percent of the profits from each firm, and retired at age 42.

Before he left business, he set up a postal service along the Atlantic Coast between New York and South Carolina. This wasn't altruistic on his part. The postal service delivered his newspaper for free. Everyone else had to pay.

The printer was also smart and prosperous enough to own paper mills and groves of trees that fed his business.

"What I learned was that he was such a free thinker," Krain said as she pointed out her work on a two-page land deed parchment signed by Franklin. "That's what made the difference. I think he's the one who put 'the pursuit of happiness' in the Declaration of Independence. He's the one that penned that."

She continued, "My 'wow' moment came for me when I was holding the Stamp Act and mounting it. I had just been reading about the Stamp Act. It was the reason for Franklin being accused of treason when he was in England. It was why he had to leave. It was one of the things that made him come back to the Colonies and say [we were not going to be able to work with] England."

In the science section Talbott demonstrated the lightning house, pushing one button to illustrate how it would explode when hit by lightning and another button to demonstrate that it remained unharmed when there is a grounded lightning rod on the structure. Pointing to a display Franklin designed to conduct electricity she casually mentioned, "He coined the terms positive [conduction], negative [conduction], conductor, grounding, and discharge."

"Franklin was an ordinary man who had an immense amount of curiosity and ability and who used these two inherent characteristics along with an extreme social nature to do extraordinary things," Talbott mused. "The lightning rod I think was the invention of his most important to the people of the world. His ability to broker an alliance with France in 1778 carried the most global impact. If he hadn't succeeded in negotiating that treaty the world would look much different geographically today."